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# The Nuclear Age by Tim O'Brien

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## BOOK REVIEW

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*John Mulvihill*

*The Nuclear Age* by Tim O'Brien. New York: Knopf, 1985. 312 pp.

THE WORK OF Tim O'Brien shows a Romantic obsession with the power of the imagination. In his 1978 Vietnam War novel, *Going After Cacciato*, in which a young American soldier imagines an epic journey that takes his squad from Vietnam to Paris, the key phrase is "Imagine the possibilities."

O'Brien's protagonists show an accompanying Romantic dread of insanity, a fear that the imagination may roller-coaster out of control. The first line of O'Brien's new novel, *The Nuclear Age*, is "Am I crazy?" The narrator, William Cowling, has struggled for years to find a way to cope with the fact that nothing lasts in this world. His fear of ordinary, inevitable, personal loss has become fused with a fear of extraordinary, contingent, worldwide loss—nuclear war. William's anxiety results in vivid, recurring, nuclear nightmares. At age forty-nine, in a final attempt to achieve security and permanence in an insecure and impermanent world, and to rid himself of his nightmares, he begins digging a fallout shelter for his family.

His twelve-year-old daughter tells him he's "nutto." His wife locks herself in the bedroom and communicates with him via not-so-cryptic poems that irritate him by turning his practical actions into useless metaphors. Meanwhile the hole itself, a kind of demon of Nothingness, assures him of his sanity and encourages him to keep digging. All this is described in five chapters that are interspersed throughout the book and carry the same title, "Quantum Jumps."

The other eight, longer chapters, with titles such as "Civil Defense," "Chain Reactions," "First Strikes," and "Escalations," are an account of William's life and wobbly mental gyroscope from 1958 to 1994—from his first nuclear nightmares at age twelve, in response to which he builds a makeshift fallout shelter in his basement out of a Ping-Pong

table and soon after suffers a brief breakdown, to his mid-life retreat to a large, "safe" house in the mountains—scene of another mental collapse following the death of a former companion and lover. For a time in between he tries to gain some mental traction through political protest, but his involvement with a group of campus radicals only leads, eventually, to one more crack-up.

William Barrett (expounder of existentialism) has said that the bomb reveals "the dreadful and total contingency of human existence." William Cowling is acutely sensitive to what the bomb reveals. His horrifying visions of a world on fire are, after all, extreme examples of what terrifies him in general—death, loss, endings. He is a Romantic visionary become existential man, the individual forced to cope with human finitude, the individual encountering nothingness. The nothingness revealed by his imagination leads him toward insanity.

In the end he decides that his imagination, if used, is also protection against insanity. The imagination allows one to walk a tightrope stretched across the abyss (of nothingness, of insanity) that has opened up under modern man. The world is insane, but we are not *if* we use our imagination.

A believer, a man of whole cloth, I would believe what cannot be believed. The power of love, the continuing creation—it cannot be believed—and I would therefore believe. If you're sane, the world cannot end, the dead do not die, the bombs are not real. Am I crazy? I am not. To live is to lose everything, which is crazy, but I choose it anyway, which is sane. It's the force of passion. It's what we have.

William survives by separating knowledge and belief. He *knows* that the end will come, that loss and death are inevitable, though he *believes* (imagines) otherwise. But by using this mental strategy he once again fails to confront the facts of existence. He indulges in one more escape, declaring in the end his intention to firm up his golf game, invest wisely, and "find forgetfulness."

Then is political activism the answer? Not in this book. The psyches of William's sometime co-revolutionaries are far from adjusted, their motives for involvement far from pure. Sarah wants to be wanted by William but settles for being wanted by the FBI. Ned wants Sarah. Tina wants to be thin and listened to. Ollie is a loser who believes revolutions are losers banging on winners.

These characters are, to be fair to sixties radicals, portrayed rather one-dimensionally. O'Brien will not impress readers with fully flesh-and-blood characters, penetrating psychology, or detailed physical description. However, he does impress with the careful structure of his novels, with an entertaining story, and, as I've tried to suggest, with a thought-provoking exploration of how we mentally survive in the

nuclear age. He also impresses with a clear, concise prose whose rhythm he knows how to vary for effect. Notice how the repetition in the following section brings together several moments of perception, creating a sense of running in place, of there being no place to hide.

You see a small plot of land enclosed by barbed wire; you see a cow grazing; you see a farmer on his tractor; you see a little boy circling under a pop fly; you see a parked Air Force truck and a tiny white outbuilding and a stenciled sign that reads: "Deadly Force Authorized." You consider running. You hear thunder. You watch a 700-ton concrete lid blow itself sideways; you say "Oh!"; you see a woman run for the telephone; you see the Titan rising through orange and yellow gases—there's still that wind and that Kansas sun and that grazing cow—and you gawk and rub your eyes—not disbelief, not now, it's belief—and you stand there and listen to the thunder and track the missile as it climbs into that strange smiling crease in the sky, and then, briefly, you ask yourself the simple question: Where on earth is the happy ending?

We know what William's answer is: only in the imagination. The nuclear age, for William, is an age, not of a delicate balance of power between nations, but of a delicate balance of mind—a balance between insanity and sanity, knowledge and belief, death and life. This is not a story of the "fate of the earth" (to use Jonathan Schell's phrase) but of the fate of a man's mind.